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ABSTRACT

Aspects of the spoken language development of the preschool and primary school child are briefly covered, with specific attention given to receptive and expressive language, semantics, syntax, memory, articulation, pragmatics, and metalanguage. Developmental norms are indicated in the areas of vocabulary development, sentence structure development, and speech sound development. Language stimulation techniques and activities for normally developing children are suggested for children between the ages of 3 through 12 years. (RH)

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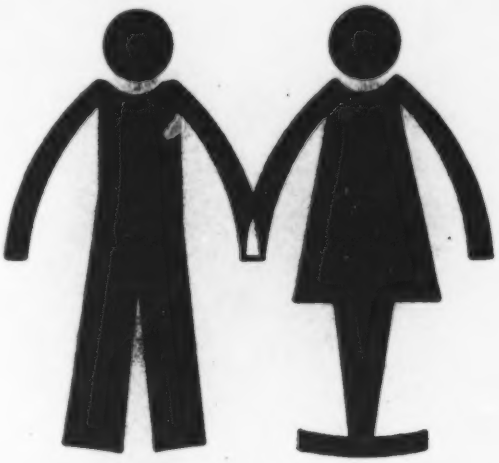

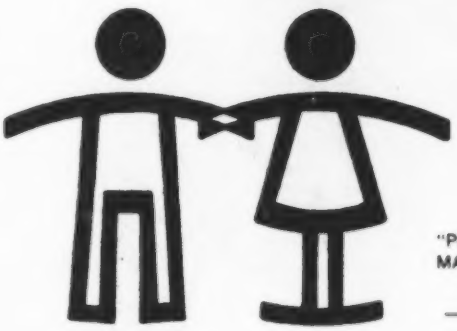

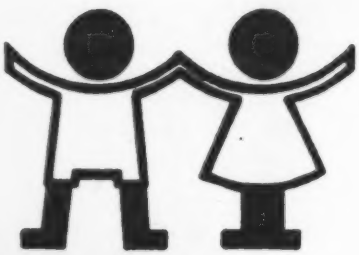

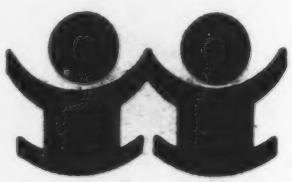

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SPOKEN LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT in PRE-SCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCHOOL AGED CHILDREN

by Noel Wight-Boycott

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SPOKEN LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

in

PRE-SCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCHOOL AGED CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will be talking about the development of spoken language in children of pre-school (three to five years) and primary school (five to twelve years) age. Of course, children begin to develop their understanding and use of language well before they are three years old - probably from birth onwards - but here we will concentrate on three years old upwards.

The term "spoken language" covers a complex of interwoven skills. It is useful to break this complex up into separate areas for study and discussion. However, it is emphasized that all areas in practice are overlapping and interdependent. The areas we will look at are labelled receptive and expressive language, semantics, syntax, memory, articulation, pragmatics and metalanguage. These "jargon" labels will be explained and illustrated further on.

Spoken language appears to follow a predictable course of development from 0 to 6 years. Unfortunately, developmental stages beyond 6 years are only vaguely known. Until recently it was thought that language development was largely complete by 6 years. Nevertheless vocabulary knowledge, use of grammar (syntax), understanding of humour and metaphor and social communication skills continue to develop into our teens and probably throughout our lives.

The developmental norms given below are meant as guidelines as to what to expect at certain ages. If a child seems to be delayed when compared with these "norms", it does not necessarily mean there is something seriously wrong. Development of spoken language will proceed in most children regardless of their circumstances. However, a rich language environment enhances and maximises a child's potential.

The ideas of language enrichment given in this paper are aimed at parents and teachers of children developing normally, although the same ideas could be applied to children needing more individualised help. If there is concern over a child's spoken language development it is a good idea to seek the opinion of a speech pathologist.

At the end of the paper a model which relates spoken language to the literacy skills of reading and writing is outlined. It has been found that a high percentage of children (50-60%) with specific literacy learning difficulties also have a spoken language delay (Chinnery et al., in press). Spoken and written language are, therefore, assumed to be closely linked. The enrichment of the one will benefit the other.

AREAS OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE

Spoken Language can be divided into two main areas - receptive language and expressive language.

Receptive Language

Receptive Language refers to the understanding of comprehension of language. When you say to a child, "Show me your eyes", and they point to their eyes, this is a demonstration of their comprehension or level of receptive language. You, the reader, are hopefully comprehending the written language on this page. You are demonstrating the level of your receptive language (which is a lot higher than the child's). Because the idea of receptive language is often a difficult concept to grasp, it is frequently overlooked. However, it is a vital prerequisite to the development of spoken and written expression. It should always precede expression developmentally or else a child will simply be a parrot, echoing empty phrases.

Expressive Language

Expressive Language is the use of language to express dreams, feelings, needs, thoughts etc. I am expressing my thoughts through a written language presently, but I might equally well be expressing the same information in a spoken language. This illustrates an important point. Expressive language refers to the vocabulary and sentence constructions formulated in my mind as well as to the speech sounds coming out of my mouth (or the letters formed by my hand).

Often spoken language is taken to mean speech pronunciation only when in fact receptive and expressive language skills are part of it too.

Spoken language can be further broken down into six (6) areas. Each area has a receptive and an expressive component.

1. *Vocabulary knowledge and concept building (semantics)*

   This area includes word meanings, naming, categories, word associations, synonyms and opposites. When a child points to named objects and pictures they are showing their receptive vocabulary knowledge. When they group things into categories or show you the functions of things on request, they are showing an understanding of certain concepts. Conversely, when they name things and categories, opposites and synonyms, discuss word meanings and word associations, they are showing the expressive semantic skills.

2. *Word and sentence structure (syntax)*

   This area refers to the word sequence and little words in a sentence. Every sentence has a structure and a sequence that we follow, e.g. "The cat dog the chased", is not permissable - the sequence is confused. "The dog are chasing a cats", - is not permissable - the sequence is correct but the little words "are" and "a" are wrongly used. A further aspect of sentence structure is added word parts that change the meaning of a word, e.g. "cat" and "cat*s*", or "jumps" versus "jump*ed*". A child's understanding or sentence and word structures precedes their use of them.

   Syntax, therefore, provides the structure or scaffolding in language. Vocabulary knowledge fills the spaces.

3. *Memory*

Structures and vocabulary have to be memorised. Memory for a sequence is particularly important in language.

4. *Word pronunciation (articulation)*

This refers to the actual speech sounds in a word. Receptively it is the child's ability to perceive the difference between the words "do*d*", and "do*g*", or between "fink" and "*th*ink". Expressively it is the ability to pronounce words correctly e.g. "*v*an" rather than "*b*an" or "hos*pit*al" rather than "hos*tip*al".

5. *Practical applications of language (pragmatics)*

When we communicate it is in the context of another who is listening (or reading). According to who is listening or to what the message is conveying, the style of language will change. A written monologue such as this paper, uses a different sentence structure and vocabulary, to that of an intimate conversation. A mother disciplining a three year old uses different vocabulary and sentence length to when she is being soothing and comforting. A child learns to listen, take turns in conversation, keep a greater distance between themselves and a stranger than between themselves and a friend. Expressively the child learns to use language to demand, question, describe, control, cajole, reason and so on. Pragmatic skills are often rehearsed and practised during play.

6. *Metalanguage*

Metalanguage is the use of language to refer to language itself or to any part of it. This ability seems to blossom at around 6-7 years old. It is the time when riddles, puns and jokes are understood and enjoyed. They realise that the same thing can be said in different ways, e.g. "The cat chased the dog" is the same as saying "The dog was chased by the cat". They can judge the grammatical correctness of a sentence, and fill in missing words and letters. It is interesting that reading and spelling is taught in earnest from 6 to 7 years. It is as if the child is ready to appreciate that the written language refers to the spoken language. This ability to consciously manipulate the language is an important development. It means that the teaching of language skills can be done directly rather than through modelling and example only.

The six (6) areas focus on particular aspects of spoken language, but in practice they all overlap with each other.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

Developmental stages have been plotted for some of these areas and are given below.

Vocabulary Development

12 months	Two words other than "mamma" and "dada"
14 months	Three words in addition to "mamma" and "dada"
16 months	Five words not including "mamma" and "dada"

18 months	Ten definite words in vocabulary
24 months	At least 300 words in speaking vocabulary
30 months	Vocabulary of 450 words
36 months	Vocabulary nears 1000 words
42 months	Vocabulary of 1200 words
48 months	Vocabulary of 1500 words
54 months	Vocabulary of 1900 words
60 months	Vocabulary of 2200 words

(Templin, 1957)

Sentence Structure Development

Age	*Receptive*	*Expressive*
3	Follows simple instructions	3-4 word sentences. Uses past tense. Uses "I". Uses articles "A: "The". "Wh" questions starting. e.g. Doggy fell down. I not want it! That a dog. Where my book is?
4	Follows commands even though object not present. Can generalize, abstract and imagine.	4-5 word sentences. "Wh" questions abound. Complex sentences start. Uses contractions "it's". Still has errors in language. e.g. Why? What? Where? When? I don't want it! Where's my book? That spotty dog runned away.
5	Follows 3 commands at once. Knows common opposites e.g. big/little. Understands same/ different. Carries plot to story.	5+ word sentences. Complete sentences. Complex sentences using "if", "when", etc. Uses future and conditional verb tenses. e.g. If that dog comes near me I'll run away. When daddy comes, we can read my book.
6 Onwards	Is not well charted. There seems to be a continued elaboration of sentence length and structure. However, there are no age norms.	

Speech Sound Development

This table indicates which sounds would be expected to be pronounced correctly at certain ages, e.g. you would expect a three year old to be able to pronounce a "p" but not "v".

Average Age	*Consonants*
3 years	h, ng, p, m, w, b, n, d, t, y, k, g, zh (as in "vision")
4 years	f, l, sh, ch
5 years	j, s, z, r
6 years	v
8 years	th

(Kilminster & Laird, 1978)

These age norms are for native English speaking children rather than bilingual or multilingual children. There is some evidence to suggest that bilingualism may slow up language development *temporarily* but not permanently. A great deal more research has to be done in this complex area (Carrow-Woolfolk & Lynch, 1982).

I would also emphasise again that those age norms are guidelines only. Children vary widely in their developmental rates. Nevertheless, if there is concern that a child is delayed, I would strongly recommend seeking the opinion of a speech pathologist rather than "waiting and seeing".

LANGUAGE STIMULATION TECHNIQUES & ACTIVITIES

PRE-SCHOOL CHILD

Techniques

During play and conversation the following techniques are effective in helping a child to develop spoken language skills.

a) *Expansion* is the revision and completion of a child's sentence.
e.g. Child: Where book gone?
Adult: Where's the book gone?

b) *Imitation* is the exact copying of a sentence but with correct speech sound pronunciation.
e.g. Child: Where boot darn?
Adult: Where book gone?

c) *Modelling* is the adding of a new sentence.
e.g. Child: Where book gone?
Adult: You're looking for your book? I think it's in your room.

All three techniques are useful, but a mixture of expansion and modelling is probably the most effective.

e.g. Child: Where book gone?
Adult: Where's your book gone? I think it's in your room.
Child: Not there.
Adult: It's not there? Have you looked?
Child: You look mum.
Adult: You look *please* mum.
Child: Please mum.

This hypothetical conversation shows how a child begins, in turn, to imitate and model the adult's sentences and vocabulary. An associated point is that it is important to leave space for the child to reply, question, comment and initiate. As adults, we sometimes forget that a child is not yet so adept with language. They need time to reply and to figure out how best to express themselves in words.

One further technique worth mentioning is *repetition*. New vocabulary is quickly learned if it is repeated in a number of different contexts, e.g. "There's a *tiger*. A tiger has stripes. A tiger roars and has sharp teeth. Know where the tiger lives?" etc.

Language Activities for the Pre-School Child

The activities have been loosely grouped into ages. If a child's language is more advanced than his/her age norm, then go on a year, and if delayed go back a year. They are meant to be examples only and to stimulate further ideas. The language areas promoted by the activity are put in brackets ( ).

3 years

Pay attention to the child when s/he is talking. Put time aside for play and conversation.

- When playing, out shopping, walking, driving etc., point out and name what you can see and hear around you. Comment on the attributes of things e.g. bright, sharp, hot, noisy. Comment on what someone or something is doing e.g. running, singing, flying (vocabulary and sentence structure).

- Do likewise with picture books, jigsaws, picture lottos etc. (vocabulary and sentence structure).

- Sing and repeat nursery rhymes, and songs with gestures (memory).

- Read and reread favourite stories (vocabulary and sentence structure, memory).

- Repeat mispronounced words correctly, emphasising the correct sound. *Don't* demand that child repeats word correctly after you.

e.g. Child: Dere a ban.
Adult: *Th*ere's a *v*an.
Child: Dhere a vban.
Adult: Yes, there's a *v*an.

(articulation)

4 years

Don't expect errorless expressive language and do continue to give time to conversation.

- Talk about groups of things as you look or play with them e.g. all the animals that live on a farm, all the animals that live in a zoo; food for breakfast, food for dinner; clothes for winter, clothes for summer (concept building and vocabulary).

- Let the child help you plan a shopping list, e.g. things to drink, things to eat, things for cleaning etc. Or help plan a picnic or party etc. (concept building + vocabulary + sentence structure).

- Continue pointing out the attributes of things, especially opposites, e.g. big/small, hot/cold. Colours and numbers are also being learnt through repetition and play (vocabulary).

- With stories, encourage the child to tell old favourites in their own words, or tell their own new stories or finish off stories you have started, e.g. "What do you think happened next?" (expressive sentence structure and vocabulary).

- Encourage to recite rhymes or fill in missed out words.
  e.g. "Jack & Jill went up the ____ "
  "To fetch a pail of _____ " etc. (memory)

- Pretend games are ideal for practising conversational skills in all sorts of situations. Children develop their imaginative play more with adults joining in than when playing on their own. (pragmatics, vocabulary, sentence structures)

5 Years

Continue to put aside some time for conversation.

- Encourage the expression of inner experiences through words e.g. wishes, fears, dreams, feelings and ideas (vocabulary & sentence structures).

- Encourage comments and descriptions of their drawings and paintings (vocabulary & sentence structures).

- Avoid direct questions, e.g. "What did you do at school today?" It is too big a subject. Try commenting on your own day first.

  e.g. Adult: I had an exhausting day! I went shopping first, then took the car to the garage. Then I did some study. And now I'm cooking dinner! How about you?
  Child: I was late to school.
  Adult: You were? I imagine you were a bit worried about what the teacher might say.
  Child: Yup. Know what?
  Adult: What?
  etc. (pragmatics)

- Continue with short songs and rhymes. (memory)

- Stories (vocabulary and sentence structure)

- Games which involve following instructions, e.g. Simon Says (receptive sentence structure and memory)

- Practise using time concepts, e.g. morning versus afternoon; today vs. tomorrow; today vs. yesterday.
  e.g. "Who came to see us *yesterday?*" (concept building &
  "Who will come and visit *tomorrow?*" sentence structures)

- Naming items in the same category.
  e.g. "Let's see how many animals we can think of." (vocabulary)

- Practise arranging and saying things in a sequence.
  e.g. numbers, days of week, smallest to biggest (memory and sentence structure)

- Role plays.
  e.g. going to shops (pragmatics)

PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILD

Techniques

At around 6 or 7 years a more direct or metalanguage approach can be adopted. For example, you can explain that things can be grouped in different ways - how many ways can we group animals - big ones, small ones, furry ones, ones that fly etc. The techniques of expansion, imitation, modelling and repetition still apply but can now be supplemented.

Language Activities

6 - 8 years

- Expand on opposites and introduce synonyms, i.e. words that mean the same. (vocabulary)

- Categorization of things into groups and sub-groups. Games like which is the odd one out and why? e.g. "Cat. Door. Dog."
  Word associations, e.g. "How are a snail and a turtle alike?"

  "Guess what I am," and "20 questions" games.
  e.g. "I'm an animal. I'm small. I'm furry. I'm grey. Who am I?"
  (vocabulary, concept building, memory)

- CLOZ exercises can be fun, i.e. where the child fills in the missing words. Try filling in with nonsense as well as sensible words.
  e.g. "The man jumped into his _____ and raced off."

  Use the old and well-learned nursery rhymes and try filling in the spaces with rhyming words.
  e.g. "Jack and Jill went up the pill / sill / grill etc.

  To fetch a pail of quarter / daughter / oughter etc.
  (vocabulary, memory, articulation)

- Associating speech sounds with letters and letter sequences e.g. "When I say 'der', I write it like this - 'D'" (memory, articulation)

- Break up words into syllables by tapping or clapping out segments. Count how many syllables in each spoken word.

  e.g. *chair* (1 syllable)
  ta-ble (2 syllables)
  el-e-phant (3 syllables) (memory, articulation)

- Practise concepts of time as expressed by "before/after", "first, second, third".
  Concepts of cause and effect, e.g. "why/because".
  Abstract concepts e.g. "Few, many, some, several", "all/except", "either/or", "neither/nor". (concept building, vocabulary, sentence structure)

- Judging grammatical correctness. e.g. "She are eating a sandwich. Tell me if that sounds okay. She are eating a sandwich. What *should* I say?" etc. (sentence structure & memory)

- Word derivations. Demonstrate how several different words can be made by adding bits to the same "root" word.

  e.g. paint — paint*ing*, paint*er*, *re*paint

  kind — *un*kind, kind*ly*, kind*er*, kind*est*

  (vocabulary, sentence structure)

- Changing nouns into pronouns and vice versa. e.g. "The sailor went to sea in a boat. He/Sailor was disappointed when it/weather became stormy. (sentence structure)

- Repeating sentences that grow progressively longer, stopping when an error is made, e.g. "The house is old"
  "The *neighbour's* house is old"
  "The *nextdoor* neighbour's house is old"
  "The nextdoor neighbour's house *and car are* old" etc.
  (memory, sentence structure)

8 - 9 years

Since more of the teaching at school is through talking at this stage, it is important that the child has a good grasp of all areas of language.

9 - 10 years

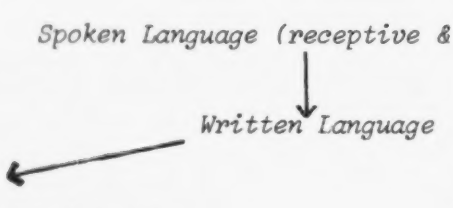
By now spoken language skill building is thought to be largely complete. (Wiig & Semel, 1984)

11 - 12 years

Introduction of metaphor and proverbs

The Relationship Between Written Language and Spoken Language

The following diagram summarises a model of the relationship between written and spoken language.



Receptive

- *Reading Comprehension*

which includes the language areas of vocabulary, sentence structure, memory for what has been read, sound-letter associations

Expressive

- *Reading accuracy*

which involves memory and articulation

- *Written expression*

which involves vocabulary, sentence structure, memory and sound-letter associations.

It is suggested that if spoken language development is delayed in some areas, then the written language will reflect those difficultues. Remediation would, therefore, need to be directed at spoken language skills as well as to the associated reading and spelling skills.

SUMMING UP

Some aspects of spoken language development in the pre-school and primary school age child have been briefly covered. There remain some very large issues that have been omitted, for example, the relationship between cognitive development and language development. There are other areas that have only been mentioned, for example bilingualism. The relationship between spoken and written language is, as yet, poorly understood, and there is still much to learn about the processes of spoken language itself. Nevertheless, it is hoped that some of the information and suggestions herein will prove to be helpful in promoting a child's language potential.

Paper based on joint seminar at the Cameragal Montessori School with the Foundation for Child & Youth Studies, June, 1985.

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